DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 199 702 CS 206 159

AUTHOR Hruska, Thomas J.
TITLE What Do You Expect, We're All Crooks.
PUB DATE Feb 81
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (16th, Minneapolis, MN, February 19-21, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; *Correctional Education; *English Instruction; Extension Education; Nontraditional Education; Nontraditional Students; Postsecondary Education; *Prisoners; Student Attitudes; *Student Teacher Relationship; *Teaching Conditions

ABSTRACT

This paper relates the conflicting impressions an English teacher who teaches extension courses at a maximum security prison has experienced while teaching literature and composition in such an environment. Anecdotes about individual prisoners and their circumstances reveal both the similarities and the extremely harsh differences between their classwork and the classwork of traditional college students. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED199702

Thomas J. Hruska
Department of English
Northern Michigan University
Marquette, Michigan 49855

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Thomas J. Hruska

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"WHAT DO YOU EXPECT, WE'RE ALL CROOKS"

Over the past six years, I have taught eight English courses for university credit at the Marquette Branch Prison, the maximum security correction facility in the State of Michigan. I have taught sections of freshman composition, Literature and Exposition, remedial English, Masterpieces of Literature, Good Books, and mythology. (At times, it seems that I've never taught anything but mythology.) What I have to offer is not a new theory or system for teaching composition or literature, nor can I present any solutions for the various and enormous problems confronting or created by our system of justice. I'm not a penologist, and in many ways I'm sure I'm either ignorant or naive about the realities of prison life. So I begin without a central thesis; instead, I'd like to offer a series of conflicting impressions.

An inmate, reputedly a highly successful hit man, has sued both the President of the university and me because an imcomplete grade he received two years earlier can no longer be made up. In an attempt to discover some compromise, I visit him in the special security facility where disruptive or dangerous residents are kept in a grotesquely modern "prison within a prison." He is pleased to have a visitor, and we chat pleasantly for some time, surrounded by glass walls, gaily painted cinder block and unseen observers.

CS206159

He complains that his wife is having difficulties now that she has no maid. Later, he earns a "D" in the course, completing the requirements for what he tells me is his second bachelors degree.

In a Masterpieces of Literature course, I am lecturing on Kafka when I make reference to Goethe. One of my students immediately corrects me: "You mean Go-thee, don't you, doc?" I assure him that I'm correct, but he's positive I'm wrong. He continues to argue until I lose my patience and ask him to be quiet. For the rest of the class, he sits in silence, sullenly staring at the floor. I have made an enemy. The following week, he asks to see me before class. He has called long distance to his old high school German teacher in Detroit, and she tells him that my pronunciation is more accurate. He wants to apologize.

No doubt carried away with the sound of my own voice, I am waxing rhapsocic about the nature of romantic love and the significance of sexual drives in literature. My oblivion infuriates one of my students. As I saunter near his desk, he cocks a lifted foot at my crotch and says, "You don't know where you is, do you man?" Clearly, I do not, and I retreat to the safety of my desk.

One of my students in a writing class, an enormously powerful man with huge, heavy arms, is clearly unable to do the required work. Week after week, his writing shows no improvement. I make corrections, repeatedly point out the same mistakes, and he faithfully revises each paper. Sometimes the revision is worse than the original. Although he continues to receive failing grades, he keeps on trying

until I draw him aside and tell him that he just doesn't have the skills to pass the course. This too he takes well, but then he asks for a favor: "Don't tell the others why I dropped the course; they might get on my case and then I'd get upset. I don't like to get upset." We shake hands, and he picks up his books and leaves. That day, I am sure that I will never be a teacher.

I have assigned The Autobiography of Malcolm X as one of the required texts in my basic composition course. One of my students, a member of a quasi-religious, neo-Nazi group with crude swastikas and crosses tattooed on his neck and hands, writes me a badly spelled note chastising me for asking him, "a member of the proud white race," to read "propaganda written by a punk nigger, rapist, and pimp." He offers me an ultimatum: if I insist that he read such trash, he will be forced to drop the course. I have had Nazis in class before, and I've read their essays on Hitler's greatness and Jewish communists, but there is something about this boy--he is hardly twenty--that makes me want to talk to him. However, there is also something threatening about the way he carries himself, so I make the mistake of contacting the prison school administration before I arrange a conference with him. Without consulting me, they drop him from the course. He has a record of violent behavior I am told. Now he is angry. By the time I manage to see him, it is too late to do anything. It probably has always been too late. Earlier, he had written in his journal that his father had had him put in jail when he was nine. Now with his knitted cap pulled down to his squinting eyes, his weight-lifter

arms bowed out at his sides, fists clenched, he glares at me. I have snitched on him, and he's been dismissed from the academic program. But he doesn't care; it's cool. He just wants to be left alone. I offer him a composition handbook as a parting gift; he takes it and we shake hands. "I'm trying to reach you," I tell him, but I know he can't hear me. After he leaves, I talk for awhile with the assistant principal who has sat in on our conference. He points out a stooped, grey figure shuffling past our window. "He's been here since 1926," he tells me.

While teaching my first prison course, I am reviewing research methods. For some reason, I stupidly begin a sentence with the following: "People like you . . . ." A large hand reaches up in the back of the room: "What do you mean, people like us?" Glibly but desperately I reply, "Well, people who don't have access to a research library." They let it pass, but they know, and I know they know. It won't happen again.

In the same class, I discover a large, red apple on my desk before class. Playfully but cynically, I wonder aloud how many of them spit on it to give it such a nice shine. After the break, I notice that a huge bite has been taken from one side. No one will snitch.

On the first day of my mythology course, I am reviewing the various texts I have selected. From time to time, my attention is drawn to one student who sits apart from the rest. He never speaks. He seems to be staring angrily at me for some reason. How have I offended him? I begin to imagine the horrible crimes he must have

committed. At the end of the class, he waits until the others have left the room; then he approaches my desk. "Here comes trouble," I think to myself. Then he begins to speak. He opens his mouth, but at first no sound emerges. He tries again. Slowly, the words come stumbling out. He is a stutterer, a black stutterer in a ruthlessly verbal society. I try to concentrate on what he is saying. After the second try, I make it out. Why, he wants to know, have I assigned this particular translation of the Odyssey, and do I have a copy of the Iliad that he could borrow?

Towards the end of the term, I arrange to have individual conferences with each of the students in my freshman composition course. During a break between appointments, an inmate enters the conference room and says hello. He wants to talk with me about my grading standards, but I've never seen him before. Why, he asks, do I give so few A's? Confounded, I reply that it's none of his business; after all, he isn't one of my students. But he complains, "I've been writing most of the papers for this course, and I'm used to getting much better grades for my work." He is a professional plagiarist. When I confront the class with my discovery, one of them offers this comforting observation: "What do you expect, we're all crooks."

Graduate school prepared me for none of this, though my work on Conrad made me aware of how important it is to sustain illusions.

Perhaps as many as sixty percent of my inmate students are unqualified for the courses they're enrolled in. Many of them have

taken a high school equivalency test, and now they are college students. Often they are only marginally educated; frequently, they sign up for whatever course is available. I find all but illiterate students in advanced composition and excellent writers in remedial English. Even if they realize they don't need or are not prepared to take a given course, they hesitate to drop it because they could be dismissed from the academic program. In addition, not all of them enroll in courses with any intention of doing the work. Inmates take courses to collect veteran's benefits, to improve their cases for the parole board, to avoid work details. If they get a "ticket" for misbehavior and are "top-locked," or if they have visitors, they miss class, usually a week's worth. If they are transferred to another facility, which happens regularly, they are dropped from the program. Sometimes the guards forget to release them for class; sometimes they simply would rather sleep in. They always have an excuse. For these reasons, and because it is so difficult for them not to give up on themselves, the drop-out rate is well over fifty percent in many courses. Admittedly, some of those who survive are excellent students, among the best I've had anywhere, but superior, even consistently industrious students are rare. On bad days, it seems to be a travesty; I'm not an English teacher, I'm a combination baby sitter and lion tamer.

My home is only a quarter-mile from the prison, and I teach most of my courses on Saturday mornings. Ten minutes after I walk through the seven gates separating my classroom from the "free world," I am in my comfortable suburban house having a late breakfast and planning the rest of my day. At times, I feel I'm living in a hiatus

where nothing is real. There are times when I'm behind the walls and I begin to see things from an inmate's perspective. I do not know the victims of their crimes, and I never ask them what they have done, though some of them tell me anyhow. So I find myself resenting the stupid "screws," the moronic regulations, the corrupt courts, the vicious police, the incompetent lawyers, the implacable parole board. At such moments, I remember that I was raised in foster homes until I was three, and I also recall coming with my adoptive parents to visit one of my uncles who served time in the same prison when I was a child. Then I feel certain that I would rather die than go to prison, and I want all of them to be released immediately. Prisons should be abolished; I am sure they accomplish nothing. And what contempt I have for those on-campus students who write fatuous essays on capital punishment.

Of course, from this distance, I suppose that I'm wrong. Yet these men are my students, not abstractions. I cannot teach them anything if I look at them as criminals. Their problems are complicated by prison life, but they are often the same problems most students have. "How can I improve my grade?" "Why do I keep making the same mistakes?" "I don't know what you want." And how they love to talk; how much they need to be listened to. Those that do come to class are always ready to participate. Whatever else can be said about teaching in prison, it is not boring. The students are there, they make contact, they do not sleep through class; D. H. Lawrence would have liked many of them. When discussions touch on issues philosophical or religious, the class comes alive. Even more than most of us, they need to make sense out of their

lives.

What can I make of these contradictions, and what is it that I, as an English teacher, can offer such students? Is it ethical to offer college courses under such circumstances? How far can standards be altered until there are no standards at all? I'm not sure. At times, I despair that I ever teach them anything. How many times can we go over the mysteries of the sentence fragment and the comma splice? Perhaps I only teach these extension courses for the extra money. Yet part of me is like an absurd priest, resisting their despair, their bad ideas and their ignorance. I am trying to save their souls it seems. Whatever the reason, I continue to teach at the prison, and despite the frustration, I find the work deeply rewarding. I offer them what I try to offer all of my students: a voice, a way to be heard, a way to discover meaning in their experience and to make that meaning significant to others. At the heart of any theory of composition is a simple truth: write about what you feel and know and have the courage to tell others what is most important. At the center of any study of literature is the on-going discovery of the collective dreams and wisdom of human experience. I teach English because there is no more important work for me to do. I teach in prison for the same reason.